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Islands of relationality and resilience: The shifting stakes of the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, island studies scholars have done much to disrupt static notions of the island form, increasingly foregrounding how islands form part of complex networks of relations, assemblages and flows. In this paper, we shift the terms of debate more explicitly to relationality in the Anthropocene. We consider the implications and challenges that a wider set of debates, particularly surrounding island "resilience", concerning the Anthropocene in the social sciences and humanities pose for island studies.

KEYWORDS Anthropocene, island studies, relationality, resilience

THE SHIFTING TERMS OF DEBATE IN ISLAND STUDIES

Over the past few decades the "relational turn" (Pugh, 2016) that has taken place across a broad range of island studies' scholarship has profoundly disrupted coherent notions of the static island form (Bongie, 1998; DeLoughrey, 2007; Glissant, 1997; Grydehøj et al., 2015; Hauofa, 2008; Hayward, 2012; Pugh, 2013a; Stratford et al., 2011). From a wide range of perspectives, island scholars have drawn our attention to how islands are part of complex cross-cutting relations, assemblages, networks, mobilities, spatial fluxes and flows (Crane & Fletcher, 2017; Hong, 2017; Kearns & Collins, 2016; Martınez-San Miguel, 2014; Rankin, 2016; Roberts & Stephens, 2017). Much of this relational work aligns with a notion prevalent within island studies of "thinking with the archipelago" (DeLoughrey, 2007; Glissant, 1997; Pugh, 2013a, p. 9). Here, islands are constituted as "relational spaces" (Stratford, 2003, p. 495) that unsettle borders of land/sea, island/mainland, and problematise static tropes of island insularity, isolation, dependency and peripherality (Grydehøj & Hayward, 2014; Pugh, 2005a, 2013b). There is concern for the "power of cross-currents and connections" (Stratford et al., 2011, p. 124) which is particularly reflective of the broader "spatial

turn" in the social sciences and humanities (Pugh, 2009, 2013a), foregrounding of how we live in a world of interconnected islands rather insular "islands of the world" (Baldacchino, 2006; Baldacchino & Royle, 2010; Clark & Tsai, 2009; Hauofa, 2008; Steinberg, 2005). Whether researching creolisation in the Caribbean, the movement of peoples in Oceania, the dynamism of shifting or disappearing ice-sheets, or the rapid construction of new human-made archipelagos in the South China Sea, recent debates in island studies have radically decentred and pushed the notion of "island" beyond singularity to instead emphasise mobile, multiple and interconnected forms (Bremner, 2016; Grydehøj, 2017; Hayward, 2012; Petzold & Ratter, 2015; Pugh, 2005b; Riquet, 2016).

In this paper, we move on from these debates to re-orientate relationality and islands more explicitly within the new stakes of the Anthropocene. In what follows we argue that how we conceptualise island studies, like so many other fields of study today, is profoundly brought into question by the Anthropocene. Whereas up until recently through the relational turn in island studies there was an emphasis on disrupting the static, insular and peripheral island form, today the new stakes of the Anthropocene further disrupt the human/nature boundary in profoundly disorientating ways, demanding new approaches to thinking through relationality and islands (see also Pugh, 2018).

The Anthropocene – a concept coined by Eugene Stormer in the 1980s and popularised by Paul Crutzen in the 2000s (Crutzen, 2002; Crutzen & Steffen, 2003; Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000) – is a disputed term, which refers to a new geological epoch, in which human activity is seen to have profound and irreparable effects on the environment. This attention to a new epoch in which humanity appears to have impacted the earth in ways which mean that natural processes can no longer be separated from historical, social, economic and political effects has powerfully challenged the modernist understanding of the nature/culture divide, separating social and natural science, destabilising the assumptions of both. Nature can no longer be understood as operating on fixed or natural laws, while politics and culture can no longer be understood as operating in a separate sphere of autonomy and freedom (Chakrabarty, 2009; Clark, 2010; Ghosh, 2016; Hamilton et al., 2015).

We wish to engage with this new set of debates and consider how they might now disrupt the figure of the island and island studies' scholarship in the Anthropocene. In this paper our own particular pathway into these debates is through the current widespread attention given to island "resilience". In particular, we explore whether the established tropes of "resilience" in island studies should be enrolled into late- or neo-liberal attempts to prevent or hold back the forces of the Anthropocene, or whether they should instead imply accepting that we already live within the Anthropocene (Chandler, 2017; Wakefield, 2017). The analytic point around which this shift turns is of fundamental importance for now rethinking through questions of islands and relationality in the Anthropocene. When understood as relational spaces of interconnection and potentiality, islands are seen as providing new resources for knowledge of how to better govern complex systems. However, the Anthropocene's intensification of relationality transforms these possibilities in ways we explore in this paper.

Although previous debates concerning island resilience have focused on the networked and interconnected nature of islands, contemporary approaches to the Anthropocene in the wider social sciences and humanities insist on a more intensive relationality and thus formulate a much less modernist or governmental approach. Whereas island resilience scholars have tended to emphasise the positive nature of interconnectivity, it is increasingly argued that the intensification of relations in the Anthropocene prevents any straightforward understanding of relationality. Relations are more likely to defy than to confirm expectations, and their intensification makes the work of relationality an ongoing process of exploration. Such exploration is more likely to be humbling than it is to be enabling, in the modernist manner. This reconfiguration of relationality involves a shift from regarding the discovery of relational interconnection as enabling new forms of governance to regarding a more intensive relationality as inaccessible to human understanding. In the Anthropocene, understanding of relationality emphasises human "response-abilities" (Haraway, 2008), sensitivities and "attuning-to" (Morton, 2017) rather than enabling imaginaries of human control (see Chandler, 2018a). This has fundamental consequences for thinking through debates about resilience, indigenous knowledge and the figure of the island (Pugh, 2018).

THE CHANGING STAKES OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Until recently, in the 1990s and early 2000s, resilience approaches sought to highlight relations and interconnections in order to govern islands in better, more efficient and reflexive ways, through challenging the linear or reductionist approaches of modernity (Briguglio, 1995; Pelling & Uitto, 2001). Rather than exclude externalities or side effects, as if they were unimportant, these earlier approaches to resilience sought to transform understandings of risk management and recursive governance (Beck, 2015). Reflective of such debates, the United Nations defined resilience as "the capacity of a system, community or society to resist or change in order that it may obtain an acceptable level of functioning and structure" (2004, Ch. 1, S.1, 17). In response to the uncertain and potentially catastrophic nexus of natural disasters, economic and cultural shocks facing populations worldwide, resilience became a core theme for international policy makers and planners more generally in economic policy, development, environmental management, emergency management, national defence, security and sustainable development programming (United Nations and the World Bank, 2010). Indeed, in 2013 Time Magazine called "resilience" the buzzword of the year, and resilience became a key theoretical lens across disciplines such as Geography, Sociology, Psychology and Social Work (Chandler, 2014; Pugh, 2014; Weichselgartner & Kelman, 2015).

Due to islands' particular vulnerabilities to catastrophe, including isolation and limited resources, the acronym SIDS (Small Island Developing States) emerged in the 1990s and 2000s as central to these resilience and extreme risk debates internationally (Kelman & West, 2009; Pelling & Uitto, 2001). The United Nations designated 2014 the "international year" of SIDS as these states came to exemplify the importance of resilience for many international policy makers, political scientists and social theorists. Because risk and uncertainty are so often argued to be prominent features of small island life, they became critical sites for advancing nuanced understandings of

resilience (Briguglio & Kisanga, 2004; Nurse et al., 2014). In March 2015, Cyclone Pam, the second-most intensive pressure storm ever measured in the Southern Pacific, devastated Vanuatu and affected the neighbouring island states of Tuvalu and the Solomon Islands. The problems faced by those living on small islands were increasingly framed not in terms of their problems alone but by enrolling a community of actors, all of which need to change and require adaptive capacities to contemporary risks. This capacity of islands to be exemplars has meant that many similarly threatened people in other parts of the world are also seen as capable of deriving important insights from island experiences that engender both vulnerabilities and forms of resilience (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2017), even as island scholars themselves regularly point out that small islands present unique sets of social, cultural and political economic circumstances (Baldacchino, 2006; Pugh, 2013a, 2016, 2018).

For these earlier approaches to island relationality and resilience, the task was that of managing or preventing the unfolding of the Anthropocene (Pugh, 2018). Climate change was to be held back through the reactive or recursive governance of feedback loops in the awareness that the interconnections between human actions and global effects can be seen, understood and acted on. In such understandings of resilience, "relationality" did just enough to problematise modernist understandings of the culture/nature divide while still retaining the human subject's ability to understand, direct and control global processes. The focus was on epistemological problems of perception and projection, seeking solutions through a growing awareness of empirical entanglement.

In more recent debates about the Anthropocene, however, this older process of critiquing modernist or rationalist approaches increasingly seems to reproduce the ontological binaries of culture and nature. It generates values on the basis of human instrumental reason and utility, on the grounds of the continuation of life itself. Such older approaches to resilience and relationality are thus in fact now argued to extend the calculative reasoning of Enlightenment approaches (Colebrook, 2014, pp. 52–55). The Gaia hypothesis of relational theorists such as Latour (2013), for example, is seen as posthuman yet is argued to extend humanism so "man can project his organic being onto life as a whole . . . it is man who will read the conditions of this system, discern its proper order, break free from merely instrumental attitudes and arrive at a proper mode of self-regulation" (Colebrook, 2014, p. 57). The policy critique based on alternative conceptions of immanence and on complex self-adapting or autopoietic systems as a guide to policy-making (often in terms of island resilience) thus increasingly seems no less anthropocentric than the transcendental problem-solving of classical modernity. As Claire Colebrook states, the notion of the earth as a "living whole with its own order and proper potentiality that might be restored" contributes to its being "sacrificed to the blindness of an organic thinking that can only insist upon its own self-evident value" (2014, p. 71). As long as climate change was viewed as a problem to be mitigated, adapted, managed, con- trolled or "solved" in some way, the Anthropocene would be constituted as a problem to be faced in the future rather than as our present condition.

The older ways of thinking through resilience and relationality have been further criticised recently for emphasising the critique of Cartesian rational man in order to have a "happy ending" – in order to save humanity and the planet rather than to welcome the Anthropocene or "life in the ruins" (Burke et al., 2016; Tsing, 2015). Older

relational, embodied and entangled approaches of late modernity are increasingly argued to be an extension of the modernist will to govern and problem-solve on the basis of intervening, governing, adapting and being resilient in the face of non-linear or complex life (Chandler & Reid, 2018). These older approaches to resilience approach the Anthropocene from a nihilistic perspective of "failure" and a speculative narrative of "loss" under modernist conceptions of the separation of culture and nature.

One reflection of the limits to this late modernist desire for relational harmony is the increasing emphasis on indigenous knowledge in many policy debates, where the figure of the island community is implicated in new narratives of resilience and as attuned to the relational interconnections beyond the modern nature/culture divide. First Peoples Worldwide (n.d.) describes indigenous knowledge in terms of observing "natural signs", such as animal behaviour: "Learning from nature in this way is an integral part of the Indigenous worldview that all things are connected, and that nature, when respected, can be a benevolent part of the whole community".

As acquisition of new relational ways of knowing gain prominence in efforts to adapt and develop resilience, indigenous knowledge has come to the forefront of international policy gatherings, as exemplified by the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in which islands figure prominently. Indigenous knowledge was acknowledged in the Fourth Assessment Report as "an invaluable basis for developing adaptation and natural resource management strategies in response to environmental and other forms of change" (IPCC, 2007, p. 15.6.1). This recognition was reaffirmed at IPCC's 32nd Session (IPCC, 2010), and consideration of traditional and indigenous knowledge was included as a guiding principle for the Cancun Adaptation Framework adopted at the 2010 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference (Nurse et al., 2014; UNFCC, 2010). The IPCC's Working Group II contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report includes local and traditional knowledge as distinct topics within Chapter 12 on human security (Adger et al., 2014). As a joint UNESCO and UN report states, indigenous knowledge "may offer valuable insights into environmental change due to climate change, and complement broader-scale scientific research with local precision and nuance" (Nakashima et al., 2012, p. 6).

Indigenous communities are interpolated as guides to ameliorating the impact of the Anthropocene, articulating the possibility of a "happy ending". Yet, as Elizabeth Povinelli notes, this understanding of indigenous knowledge reduces indigenous analytics to local or cultural knowledge of relations, extending the sphere of being at home in the world, enabling late liberal governmentality to "saturate Being with familiar and reassuring qualities" (2016a, p. 56). The actual world is never "given its due", never appreciated in all its inaccessible multiplicity and potentiality, but is instead flattened and reduced to networked relations. More generally in such contemporary critiques, we therefore see that older relational approaches – such as actor network theory, new materialism and posthumanism – are increasingly seen as operating on the basis of a set of binaries of what "man is not", conflating man with the positive or vitalist characteristics of life in general, which need to be rescued from modernist rationalism (Colebrook, 2014, p. 161). This is leading to all sorts of new and alternative suggestions from today's influential environmentally-concerned philosophers, like Isabelle Stengers (2012), who calls for us to "reclaim animism" in order to "re-enchant

the world" in the face of the claims of modernist science. Colebrook hits the nail on the head:

Humanism posits an elevated or exceptional 'man' to grant sense to existence, then when 'man' is negated or removed what is left is the human all too human tendency to see the world as one giant anthropomorphic self-organizing living body [...] When man is destroyed to yield a posthuman world it is the same world minus humans, a world of meaning, sociality and readability yet without any sense of the disjunction, gap or limits of the human. (2014, pp. 163–164)

Colebrook diagnoses humanism as "inhuman", its "calculative reason" incapable of coping "with the complexity and dynamism of affective life" (2014, p. 173). Efforts to hold back or ameliorate the effects of the Anthropocene offer a narrative of redemption: after the detour of modernity, man is returned to the world, and new relational understandings enable new forms of regulatory climate-friendly island governance. The problem facing advocates of contemporary "posthuman" forms of governance is that these approaches are increasingly problematised not because they emphasise relationality over rationalism but because they do not take relationality far enough.

INTENSIFYING RELATIONALITY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Relationality was previously understood to extend human knowledge beyond modernist linear and reductionist framings in island resilience. It is now increasingly clear that relationality cannot be contained within these anthropocentric framings (Colebrook, 2014; Harman, 2010; Morton, 2013, 2016; Stengers, 2012). Harman (2010) argues that whereas the older post- structuralism of Deleuze and Latour advance, in the absence of a metalanguage, an ethic of ecophilosophical embeddedness, phenomena of today such as global warming suggest that there is nowhere to stand "outside" of things, no objectively bound space from which to stand aside and document. As Danowski and de Castro (2016, p. 17) state, these new approaches of authors like Harman and Morton merge psychological and ecological space, not only in the sense that they conflate modernity's nature/culture divide but also that everything becomes humbled within the Anthropocene's vast, intensified realm of relationships.

These wider sets of debates therefore potentially destabilise contemporary discussions of island resilience. Rather than regarding resilience as a governance practice that stabilises and extends the present condition and wards off the crisis of cli- mate change, it would be better to accept that the crisis has already occurred. As Stephanie Wakefield (2017, 2018) argues, new understandings, which accept that we already live in the Anthropocene, call for an entirely new set of approaches and practices. To assume that we live post-crisis would mean – taking CS Holling's concept of the "adaptive cycle" – that we are in the "back loop", i.e., in a period of flux and reorganisation, in contrast to the "front loop" of stability and gradual progress (Gunderson & Holling, 2002) associated with the Holocene. In this period – of reorganisation, repurposing and repositioning – everything is in play and nothing can be taken for granted.

Living in the Anthropocene thus necessitates a fundamental shift in understanding relationality as destabilising (rather than as enabling governance as resilience) and thus elicits new non-anthropocentric approaches to knowledge and governance (see Chandler, 2018a). That is, relationality cannot be governmentalised to enable greater control over life. The question then is: How will island studies scholars respond to and situate themselves within these wider debates, growing in prevalence in the Anthropocene? In the past, the focus on small islands adapting to disasters and vulnerabilities was often framed as the application of non-indigenous epistemological forms of reason, yet today's recognition that we are already in the Anthropocene encourages a different set of assumptions and practices: not just an increasing role for island communities but also an increasing awareness of existence beyond the human. Just as resilience approaches are being reconfigured in these terms, the construction and awareness of indigenous knowledge highlights this shift towards a new relationality.

Povinelli's (2016a) work with indigenous communities, for example, emphasises thinking in terms of an "analytics of entities" (rather than the passing down of "cultural" or "local" relational knowledge) as a way into an infinite world of rela- tions. This is distinct from conceiving of the world as a fixed set of signs or indicators:

Everything could be a sign pointing to something else, which interpreted the other thing. [...] It was within the field of interpretation that any one sign could reveal that all the previously understood signs, and thus the foundation of interpretation itself, had to be rethought. (Povinelli, 2016a, p. 123)

Povinelli (2016a, pp. 123–124) makes the point that it would be "seductive" to translate these analytics as "listen to what the country is saying", enabling a new relational narrative of inclusion and attention, enrolling indigenous interlocutors and nonhuman actors and agencies into discussions of resilience and adaptation to climate change. Yet, she cautions against this view of relationality as making the world more meaningful, rather than stranger, for us: "The generosity of extending our form of semiosis to them forecloses the possibility of them provincializing us" (2016a, p. 142). Objects do not speak to us or act on our behalf, pointing the way to knowledge and understanding, because relationality is too intense: "Objects do not stay one thing but become other things because of these forces of shaping and shifting and assemblage" (Povinelli, 2016b, p. 119). Kohn (2013) further illustrates this in his seminal work How Forests Think, which sets forth the dynamic nature of semiotic interaction in which life contingently emerges in nested ecologies of signs and responses (see also Vivieros de Castro, 2014).

A growing range of new environmentally-concerned philosophers of the Anthropocene thus argue that relationality has become too rich, too intense, for the stable systems of networks and assemblages that have been believed to hold the key to the re-enchantment of the world and to enabling island governance through new forms of posthuman sensing, awareness and interconnective process-tracing. In the work of these contemporary ecologically-aware philosophers of the Anthropocene we have discussed in this paper, the older Deleuzian view of assemblages, rhizomic relations and (de)territorialisations is being increasingly read in less vitalist and enchanting ways.

Many of the new approaches coming out of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, for example, should be seen less as positing a lack of relations between objects than as positing that objects are too relational to be grasped in coherently governable ways. The withdrawnness of objects (our inability to grasp them beyond the forms in which they appear to us) is ontological, not in terms of a distance in time or space, but rather the opposite; in their "weird essential- ism", objects are "too close" to focus on, too full, too present for us (Morton, 2016, p. 65). Their distance from us is a pro- duct of the richness of the relationality of the world, its infiniteness. Through such contemporary framings of relation, although objects, including islands, are real, they are never present to us or for us or fixed in some way. It is precisely their relationality that makes objects withdrawn (see Chandler, 2018b; Pugh, 2018). It is the relationality of the world – of the Anthropocene – which now suggests that older ways of relational thinking are incapable of returning the human to the world, cannot "re-enchant" the world and will never make humans more at home in the world.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have discussed how older ways of thinking through relationality are being challenged by new debates in the Anthropocene. One outcome of this might be more reflective and contemplative approaches to island studies, approaches that return us in new ways to the specificities of different island and archipelagic experiences. New relational thinking raises new concerns about how islands still tend to be reduced to tropes of island adaptation, vulnerability and resilience, which seek to counteract the intense relationality of the spatiotemporal forces of the Anthropocene (Pugh, 2018). A challenge for island studies will be whether we accept this new relational thinking, raise new questions, or indeed challenge it through island studies by focusing on different and alternative political ideals and aspirations. It will in any case be necessary for island studies scholars to maintain their vigilance regarding the use of the island as a microcosm, exemplifying in small form what goes on elsewhere. Islands have often been objectified through reductive tropes of "dystopias", "utopias", "paradises", "sanctuaries" and, today, as we begin confronting the Anthropocene, in problematic discourses of resilient adaptation and the management and governance of relation.

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